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OBSERVATIONS on the Cause and Consequences
of PREJUDICES against RELIGION.

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S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE
SYNOD of ABERDEEN.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE following discourse was preached at Aberdeen some years ago. It is now published by the approbation of some of the hearers, and of persons for whose judgment the author bath the highest esteem. His end in this publication will be compleatly answered, if the sentiments contained in it produce that effect upon the mind of any individual which every reader will observe to have been the author's obvious intention.



2 TIMOTHY, i. 8.

*Be not thou ashamed of the testimony of our
Lord.*

EVERY person, my reverend fathers and brethren, who hath examined his own mind with any degree of attention, must have observed, that as there are certain objects upon which his thoughts are permitted to dwell with peculiar complacency; so there are others which, without examining the motive, he renounces with disapprobation. Those men who know from experience how apt the passions are, even in the coolest minds, to influence the decisions of the understanding, will be solicitous at least, in every momentous research, to estimate so justly the proper value of external inducements, as that Reason may proceed in her examination without encountering strong prepossessions, if not with perfect impartiality. Perfect impartiality, in the process of any enquiry which relates to happiness, we cannot (as I shall endeavour to prove in another part of this discourse) expect to obtain. It is with the speculative opinions of mankind, in most instances, as with the vices which are to be ultimately derived

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from them. The progression of argument, by which reason is misled in the one case, and practice influenced in the other, is slow and imperceptible. Our passions are admitted as advocates when we are wholly insensible of their operation, and their objects come at last to be regarded as principles established by the dictates of understanding.

To enumerate particular instances by which this observation might be confirmed in the matters of common life, would lead to a detail, which, though not perhaps wholly foreign to the subject, might yet be considered as unnecessary by persons who have examined the motives which operate most forcibly on the human heart. I shall therefore only observe on this subject, that not only is the judgment, in many instances, regulated by the impulse of the passions, but we even sometimes are ourselves at a loss to discover the predominant principle from which our actions proceed. Thus little as we may be able to trace the connection betwixt ambition and avarice, yet the latter of these is often made a tool to effectuate the purposes of the former; though this may be as much a secret to the individual who is actuated by these passions, as to the persons with whom he is connected in life.

That motives originally suggested by prejudice should regulate our determinations in subjects of greater importance and utility, is a truth
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which ought rather to be regretted than called in question. Experience will inform us, that not only is our belief, on many occasions, regulated by the standard of inclination, but we are even apt, in certain circumstances, to be ashamed of *confessing* the principles whose veracity is established by the fullest conviction. Of this the caution given to Timothy, in the words of the text, affords a particular and unexceptionable instance. We have no reason to think that the apostle Paul either suspected Timothy of wavering in his opinions, or of embracing the maxims of infidelity. He, on the contrary, writes to him as a person whose example might be eminently beneficial to the interests of religion. Still, however, it must be acknowledged, not that the apostle looked upon the person to whom he wrote as a man unsettled in his principles; but that he considered him as susceptible of impressions arising from external circumstances, and liable to be actuated by these impressions in the conduct of life. This is obvious from the clause immediately subsequent to the words of the text. *Be not* (says he) *ashamed of the testimony of our Lord*: he subjoins, *nor of me his prisoner*; a circumstance by which it is plain that the apostle meant to guard him against being biassed in his opinions by the judgment of the world; which is too commonly formed either upon *events*, which are at best precarious standards of real excellence; or upon *external*

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appearances, which are properly no criterions either of merit or defect.

It ought, however, to be remembered, that though temporal rewards or punishments are not represented in the writings of the New Testament, as the necessary consequences either of good or bad actions; yet at the time when the apostles were employed to propagate the doctrines of Christianity, their followers were compelled to struggle with difficulties, of which it is our advantage, in an happier æra of the world, to be only able to conceive imperfectly by description. Persecuted as they were by those persons upon whom it was incumbent to have patronised their doctrines; obliged to bear the scourge of Hatred, the stab of Reproach, and the united opposition of Prejudice and Malevolence; excluded every hope of obtaining that temporal grandeur, which is the aim of Ambition; and hunted about, like beasts of prey, from one country to another; is it any wonder that in such circumstances men were sometimes ready to start at a view of so many difficulties; and that even those who had embraced the Christian religion, were apt, on some occasions, if not to *change* their principles, at least to be *afraid* or *ashamed* of confessing them? The apostle, therefore, calls upon Timothy to persevere inflexibly in an adherence to his professions, determined to oppose the open attacks of Hatred and Contumely; as well as to repress the more insinuating

insinuating and dangerous suggestions of his own passions.

Whatever alterations may be permitted to take place in the external government of the world, human nature is still unalterably characterised by the same general and distinguishing properties. Effects similar to those which have been formerly produced, will still arise from similar inducements, and will vary in proportion to their degrees of importance. *To be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord* was a character appropriated, no doubt, to some of the first Christians; and *to be ashamed of this testimony* is a character which may still be appropriated to Christians whose practice is actuated by similar impressions.

As an impartial investigation of the principle from which this prejudice originally proceeds, will open a new field of enquiry, so, if properly treated, it is of that kind which may be made subservient to the most beneficial purposes. Permit me only to observe, before I enter upon it, that I have made choice of this subject, because it excludes the presumption of seeming to prescribe rules of conduct (a task for which years, inexperience, and inclination, concur to disqualify me), rather than from any hope of conveying instruction to persons from whom I ought to receive it with respectful gratitude.

I shall throw together a few observations on the nature and consequences of the species of infidelity

infidelity hinted at in the text under the following heads :

- I. I shall endeavour to trace the cause to which it must be ultimately referred, and enquire how far this is equal to the complicated effects which are said to arise from it.
- II. I shall consider the different manners in which this cause operates on the thoughts, the characters, and the actions of men, as far as these are connected with the subject of the present enquiry.
- III. I shall attempt to refute the arguments by which men impose upon themselves in this matter.

After considering the subject in these lights, I shall sum up the whole in an application.

I. I begin with endeavouring to trace the cause from which the effect hinted at in the text is to be ultimately referred; and with enquiring how far it is equal to the consequences which are said to arise from it.

1. Observations which either regard universal feelings, or whose truth is illustrated by unquestioned examples, need not to be treated with that process of argumentation which is required to remove suspicion, to detect error, to expose prepossession, or to illustrate obscurity. To be ashamed, on some occasions, of confessing those religious principles to the world, whose
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real importance and tendency we do not call in question ;---this, if it is not to be ranked among the number of feelings which are common to all, may yet surely be placed among those observations which are confirmed by too many examples to stand in need of additional illustration from experience. Indeed, a very short acquaintance with mankind will convince us, that there are few truths established by moral evidence, which men will not either be induced to call in question, or at least to act as if they did call in question, by being exposed to a proper temptation. The desire of promoting the plans of ambition ; the fear of offending persons whose good opinion we are solicitous to cultivate ; the prepossessions which may be entertained against us by too forward a confession of, or too obstinate an adherence to, certain principles ; and, above all, the fear of incurring the suspicion of intellectual defect ; these are the general motives by which men are influenced to adopt opinions, whose effects, on the practice, become insensibly conspicuous.

As every error, however, in the conduct of life hath its original principle in the human heart, it is necessary, in order to prevent its progress, that this principle should be accurately investigated ; and that we should mark, if possible, the precise point at which a commendable pursuit, by being carried too far, is apt to mislead us into vice or extravagance.

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Let it be observed, in treating the present subject upon this plan, that one great source of errors in the practice of mankind, is that strong attachment which we naturally feel to the objects of sense. Surrounded, as we constantly are, with prospects which flatter and arrest imagination, our views are contracted within the narrow compass of a few immediate gratifications ; if the series of intellectual pleasure is not considered as precarious, it is yet postponed as remote, and the attainment of present satisfaction is estimated as fully adequate to the distant view of ideal felicity. Thus a man who is immersed in the business of life, and is proceeding successfully in the acquisition of riches, finds much higher pleasure in contemplating the end of his pursuit as practicable, and in observing the progressive steps by which it is brought within his reach, than he can possibly expect in the enjoyment of happiness, of whose commencement, nature, and excellence, he can at best but form a comparative estimate. He is led, therefore, gradually to pursue those expedients as the most eligible, which, upon the whole, have the most obvious tendency to secure his possession of some present gratification ; and when these appear to be inconsistent with those by which the ultimate possession of future felicity is to be obtained, or future misery evaded, a prejudice is immediately established against both ; and instead of regulating his ac-

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tions by his principles, he is only solicitous of reconciling his principles to his actions.

In the same manner, the man, who is ambitious of being thought to possess intellectual superiority, is apt to be misled in his practice by a mistake exactly similar to that of the former. He wishes to obtain the approbation of persons who are distinguished by knowledge and penetration: he considers the greater part of mankind as creatures from whom he ought to differ in sentiments, character, and appearance: he resigns himself wholly to the pursuit of this particular end; and he becomes ashamed of maintaining truth, not because he calls it in question, but because he desires to deviate in every thing from the beaten track of opinion. We are not, however, to suppose, that principles contrary to those which education, habit, and reflection, have concurred to stamp upon the mind; that such principles are *immediately* erased, either by the early impulse of desire, or by the powerful stimulus of passion. The first characters which are written upon the memory, like the ground-colour in a picture, cannot, without great difficulty, be totally effaced. A train of new ideas may afterwards intervene, and may vary in proportion to particular spheres of observation; but the memory, like the sheet upon which external resemblances are exposed, will retain tenaciously the original impression,

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whose predominancy, in certain points of view, will appear conspicuous.

In reality, there cannot be a more judicious and pertinent admonition (putting inspiration out of the question) than that of the apostle, that we ought, by every possible means, *to resist the first beginnings of evil*, because their professionary influence is gradual and deliberate. An enemy, who overcomes us by surprize at one time, may be resisted or conquered at another, when we have time to prepare for his reception; but an enemy who makes slow encroachments upon our property, and has address enough to render his conduct apparently equitable, obtains an advantage, which we observe when it is too late to apply an adequate remedy.

The propriety with which this remark may be referred to the present subject, must be obvious upon bestowing the least attention. In the first part of life, persons who have had the advantage of education and example, are influenced in their practice by virtuous principles, and seldom deviate from the path of duty without feeling that internal remorse which may be properly termed the consciousness of having acted irrationally. As the seeds of virtue, however, are in every mind blended with vicious propensities, the predominant passion, whatever it may be, is apt to introduce errors of conduct, which frequent repetition, after several

veral unsuccessful efforts to correct them, renders them familiar ; and the remonstrances of an ignorant monitor are either stifled by the suggestions of passion, or their effect is obliterated by self-imposition. Thus by attempting, on a few occasions, to oppose the vehemence of desire by the weak and ineffectual arguments of reason (which, in the time we are employing them, we wish not to prevail), the task of subduing an inherent propensity begins to be considered as wholly impracticable ; and we take no time to distinguish betwixt the regular effects of virtuous inclinations, and the extreme, which is rendered imperceptible by indolence, and agreeable by indulgence.

This process of observation is necessary to assist us in discovering the cause from which the contempt of religion is to be ultimately derived, as it is one of those appearances in the characters of men which arrives at its full height by slow and insensible approaches. We shall venture then to affirm, that this particular strain of conduct marked out by the words of the text, proceeds originally from the desire of esteem, permitted to exceed the bounds of Reason, and characterized by the name of Vanity. From this despicable failing, which every man of penetration is solicitous to disguise from the cognizance of curiosity, are we to trace a consequence the most important, and seemingly re-

mote ; that of appearing to be ashamed of religion.

To be convinced of the truth of this assertion, we need only to consider the manner in which the desire of esteem usually operates on the human mind. The man who is actuated by this as a predominant passion, will naturally be solicitous to render his character agreeable to the different classes of persons with whom he is connected in life. His supreme study will be to *become all things to all men*, that he may acquire the great end of his pursuit, by being universally esteemed as a man of the happiest and most amiable manners. To comply indeed with the dispositions, and even with the foibles of mankind in a few inoffensive instances, tho' no other end may be proposed by it than that of gaining the character of an agreeable member of society, is a design which in some measure merits approbation. But the man who can carry his end still higher, and can propose, as a principal aim, to render his conduct, in this respect, subservient to the purpose of promoting the happiness, or 'the real interest of his fellow-creatures, will deserve to be regarded as a pattern of genuine and consummate benevolence. This was the great end which the apostle Paul intended to effectuate by the talents which Nature had conferred, and education had contributed to enlarge and call into action. As
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every human character is composed of beauties and blemishes blended promiscuously, we are willing, in common cases, to overlook a few private and selfish intermixtures in the disposition of a person who is actuated by a motive of this nature, and even to estimate his actions by the standard of the apparent intention with which they were performed.

Thus far then the desire of esteem appears to be a passion destructive of the best effects, and to act as an incentive to benevolence and rectitude. Considered in another light, we shall find it counteracting these ends, and producing consequences which are naturally subversive of their existence. As this passion, when it is under proper management, suggests the noblest ends, and employs the most natural expedients to render them effectual; so vanity, which is no other than the desire of esteem carried to a culpable length, proposeth only to obtain ends which terminate wholly in the happiness of an individual. In proportion to the narrowness of that circle within which the views of this passion are contracted, is the power with which it operates upon the character and conduct. Thus it happens so frequently, that men who are influenced by vanity are apt, upon many occasions, to exceed the limits of prudent reserve, by sacrificing every inferior pursuit to the gratification of their predominant passion. The favourable impressions which we receive of cer-
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tain characters, either from a reliance on the judgment of the world, or a particular conformity of disposition in some circumstances of importance, produceth a much stronger effect upon the actions of men, than superficial enquiry would lead us to conceive. The person who is elated with the idea of his own imagined superiority, will be ready, on all occasions, to expose his contempt of vulgar prepossessions, and to embrace that loose, or (as he may esteem it) liberal manner of thinking, which distinguishes the higher order of spirits from those common theorists, who judge of right and wrong rather by the standard of truth, than by the character of individuals.

From all these circumstances, it must necessarily happen, that the model upon which a man of this temper forms his opinions, must be wholly remote from such as we are accustomed to survey. This is an indispensable ingredient in the constitution of a mind susceptible of any great degree of vanity, which, without regarding the intrinsic excellence of its theory, is struck with the thought of its being extraordinary. Principles which have been formerly received as just and reasonable, when they are placed in the light of common maxims, imprinted alike upon every mind by education, come in time to be disregarded merely because they are not singularities known only to a few; and if Reason does not afterwards reject them

as absurdities; yet Passion represents an open defence of them as a conduct which might expose us to the censure of preserving a weak and superstitious attachment.

One of those observations from which the imperfection of human nature may be most obviously collected, is, that instead of being retarded in our decisions by the importance and intricacy of particular subjects which fall under our cognizance, we are, on the contrary, always readiest to decide with precipitancy upon the most interesting tenets, when Vanity prompts to consider such a procedure as tending to establish, in the minds of persons whom we esteem, a favourable prepossession of our principles and character. The reason of this apparently unaccountable conduct is obvious, that from a mistaken notion of true honour, a man of vanity considers it as a much greater mark of superior understanding to be able to sacrifice a point of considerable consequence to the judgment of that person whom he proposeth to imitate, than it is to have the pleasure of differing from the vulgar merely in matters which he regards as indifferent. The latter he looks upon as a short and easy step in the path of singularity, which may be taken by every superficial flutterer who is engaged in the same pursuit with himself; but the former is an effort against the tide of Obstruction, which requires the exertion of the firmest resolution. Of

these progressive steps by which vanity insensibly operates on the mind and conduct, the natural effect must be, that the man who is under the influence of this passion, will be ashamed, on many occasions, of confessing certain principles to the world, whose truth and importance he does not really call in question at the bottom; and that this shame will be augmented in proportion to the intrinsic weight of these principles, provided they are considered as hackneyed and common maxims, adopted by prejudice, and fostered by superstition.

It is therefore obvious, that infidelity, in whatever shapes it may appear to the world, is originally derived from no other principles, than that low and preposterous vanity which every man who possesseth it is ashamed to acknowledge. We have seen the manner in which this passion operates on the character and actions, and the steps by which, from a strange fatality, it leads a man to be principally ashamed of confessing his belief of those truths to the world, which Reason would lead him to consider as the most momentous and interesting.

If we examine the effects which this passion constantly produceth in matters of common life, we shall find that it is every way equal to the consequence, which, in the present particular instance, is said to arise from it. Let any individual look around him in the world, and point out, in the circle of his acquaintance,
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that person, however distinguished otherwise by superior abilities, whose ruling and distinguishing foible is vanity. He will probably find that such a man will be led to commit many mean and ridiculous actions; and that his character will be marked by apparent inconsistencies, which it will be no easy matter perfectly to reconcile. This observation might, if it was necessary, be illustrated by examples drawn from some of the most eminent personages in antient history, who by discovering, on some occasions, their reach and penetration, and by displaying, on others, an immoderate degree of vanity, become alternately the objects of admiration and ridicule. We might mention Tully, the orator, the patriot, the protector of his country, but the herald of his own fame, who, misled by his vanity, was not ashamed to desire his friend Atticus even to exceed the bounds of truth in extolling his illustrious actions. In a character so eminent as that of Cicero, vanity is unquestionably a more conspicuous blemish than it might perhaps have been in a man less distinguished by superior penetration: its predominancy, however, in this single instance, discovers the bad effects which it is naturally fitted to produce upon the mind of man, and the inconsistent manner in which he is ready to act, when directed, on some occasions, by the dictates of Reason, and stimulated, on others, by the impulse of so pernicious a foible.

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There is, it must be acknowledged, something, which, upon superficial inspection, might appear extraordinary, in deducing the original source of infidelity from so mean a passion as that of Vanity. Yet let Reason weigh the proof with impartiality, and let every individual who hath felt the power of this passion, pronounce whether he hath not, on many occasions, been prompted either to conceal his real sentiments, or at least to confess his belief of them with some confusion and reluctance.---In this whole detail, I have considered the being ashamed of Christ as a species of infidelity; because, as the mind is always impatient of submission to a painful feeling, when a man has got thus far on the road without checking the first suggestions of temptation, he seldom stops without making nearer approaches to the end of his journey. The illustration of this fact forms the second branch of the present enquiry, in which we propose, after having traced the cause from which the contempt of religion derives its origin, to consider the different manners in which this cause operates on the thoughts, the characters, and the actions of men, as far as these are connected with the subject of this discourse.

2. As an account of the manner in which Vanity operates on the character of an infidel, opens a new and inviting field of speculation, so a close and impartial representation of it

might answer the important end of leading the unwary to timely recollection, by presenting to them a view of that precipice to which they are imperceptibly advancing, and whose appearance (shocking at first) becomes less disagreeable in proportion as they approach to it.

1. The first class then of men who fall under the censure of being ashamed of Christ, is that of professed and open infidels. It must be observed, that I do not here speak of those (if any such there are) who, through long practice, have become hardened in error, and who have erased from their minds, as the prejudices of education, every becoming sentiment of God, and every impartial dictate of reflection: I mean only to take notice of those in whose breasts the voice of Conscience is not wholly stifled, and who wear the mask of irreligion at the expence of many an inward pang, and many a severe, though unavailing, conviction. These men, with a few common words, taken up for no other reason, but because they are fashionable, profess to turn every thing that is serious into ridicule, and apply the hackneyed phrases of Superstition and Bigotry to every distinguishing tenet of Christianity; phrases which, by improper and frequent repetition, have become justly offensive to those who would erect the structure of solid reasoning upon the foundation of truth. This unhappy practice proceeds from the natural desire of esteem diverted by Preju-

dice into a wrong channel; and the persons who use it mean to recommend themselves as possessed of superior understanding, and of exalted conceptions, when, to a man even of common discernment, he discovers only an unnatural mixture of wickedness and folly.

In what degree either of these is discovered, it is not our present business to determine. We need only to observe, that the desire of esteem never shows itself to the world in this light, unless in a man who is inwardly conscious that he cannot make himself conspicuous in any other way. That person who is really distinguished by superior abilities, will apply his talents to some other office, and will never attempt to hurt his fellow-creatures by spreading opinions detrimental to society: but the meaner creature, who wisheth to be remarkable, and cannot obtain his end by any noble method, joins in the cry against religion, and endeavours to become the object of admiration by sapping the foundations of truth and of happiness.

2. Such, however, is the power of habit, and so great the deference that is paid to the judgment of the world, that there are others, who though they do not profess to expose religion to ridicule; though they are even highly displeased at observing its institutions treated with sarcasm and irony; though they are convinced of its truth, and look upon it as a matter of infinite consequence; yet from the fear
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of being accounted persons of mean contracted sentiments, are ashamed openly to appear in its defence. Upon these men, the same desire of esteem, carried to an improper height, operates with the same force, though in a manner somewhat different from its influence on the former. The principal object of such a man's ambition must be to secure the approbation of some particular persons, either from motives of interest, or of selfish gratification; and as Reason is always ready to act in subserviency to the predominant passion, he may consider his silence, on such an occasion, as rendering him at least exempted from reproof, if not entitled to reward. The fallacy of this specious pretence need not be pointed to any person who is willing to weigh it with deliberation. Even if we should suppose that silence, in a case of this nature, might not be mistaken for consent, as is generally the case in other matters, yet it is still plainly confessing, that the approbation or the censure of the world hath a degree of weight with such a man, which the interest of religion, however comparatively interesting, is not sufficient to balance. The apostle Paul, though he did not directly assist the murderers of Stephen, yet because he stood near, and kept the cloaths of that infatuated multitude, looked upon himself as having participated the crime.

3. As the same objects which arrest the whole attention of one man, are surveyed with
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the utmost indifference by another ; so the same passion, operating on different tempers, produceth effects which are apparently inconsistent. We ought, however, to remember, that objects are of greater or less importance to individuals, in proportion to the *imaginary value* at which they may be estimated. To lead in a fashion, or to govern a kingdom ; to blow up a bubble, or to found a monarchy, are matters of equal consequence to that person who contemplates the attainment of either as the completion of happiness. Thus it happens, that while principle retains so much power over some persons as to keep them silent, in certain cases, from the timid maxims of prudence, there are others who, in the height of their zeal for so noble a character as that of free and impartial enquirers, in determined opposition to their real sentiments, will support a doctrine which they know to be false.

It is an observation founded on reason, particularly illustrated by the history of the nation in the last and present centuries, that when one class of men carry any one system of religion to an extreme, and fall into opinions which are neither just in speculation, nor useful in practice ; their successors, instead of compounding matters judiciously, and reducing every thing to its proper standard ;---by endeavouring to avoid the rock upon which their fathers were wrecked, dash themselves at once upon the opposite precipice.

precipice. What hath been thus observed of states and kingdoms, may with equal propriety be applied to individuals. Our judgment of the most interesting matters is frequently determined by an accidental approbation or dislike of the person who proposeth them to our attention; and our desire to obtain the character of penetration and discernment makes us often embrace the wrong side of a question, when we see the right one weakly defended, or drawn to an extreme. Such is the weakness of man, and so trifling and capricious are the circumstances upon which his sentiments depend!

4. The last class of men, to whom the character of being ashamed of Christ may be justly appropriated, is of those who are not only convinced of the truth, but who really practise many duties of Christianity; but, from the same fear of the judgment of the world, are afraid to confess the one, or to be found in the exercise of the other. These men pass their lives in a perpetual struggle betwixt the reproaches of conscience, and the suggestions of vanity. The one impels them to pull off the mask, and openly to profess themselves the disciples of Christ; the other deters them by exhibiting the conduct of the world to their view, and by setting before them the constructions which will be passed by others upon their conduct, as the effect of prejudice, of superstition, or of weakness. This internal commotion

tion accounts for that inconsistency of action which one may observe in them on different occasions. When their reason is permitted to predominate, they consider Christianity as a necessary and important institution, and look a little forward to the consequences of their wickedness. They are terrified by the threatenings denounced against those who are ashamed of their principles, and they determine to alter their course, and to conform themselves to the precepts, and to the rules of the Gospel. But as this resolution is directed by no proper means, and is built upon no just foundation; as it terminates finally in a few vain and useless efforts, which serve no other end than that of discovering the imbecility of unsupported resolution; as, in short, it is only the fruit of an hasty sally of passion, and not the deliberate result of conviction; like the house which was built upon the sand, it tumbles into ruin before the first snare of temptation which is planted to entangle it. Thus, when the voice of that impartial monitor Conscience is stifled by the suggestions of vanity and prejudice, the man immediately resumes his former course; and though he may in secret practise some necessary duties of religion, yet in public he professeth to comply with the mode, and assumes that easiness and ductility of manners which is best adapted to recommend him to the world.

The persons who commonly fall with greatest ease into this practice, are those who, having perhaps at first had just principles impressed upon their minds by education, are afterwards thrown, by the accidents of life, into bad company, and whose minds become insensibly tinctured with habits against which reflection maintains a long and steady resistance. When, in the heat and freedom of conversation, religion is exposed to raillery and invective; when every thing that is sacred is treated as superstitious, and every thing mysterious is ridiculed as absurdity; at that time perhaps their vanity triumphs over every other passion, and, instead of stemming the torrent, they are hurried away by its force. But when serious recollection enables them to decide more impartially on the question, and principles not thoroughly eradicated exert a part of their wonted power upon the mind;---matters then appear to them in a very different light. Thus an unequal struggle is perpetually maintained in the mind betwixt reason and the passions, the latter precipitating to the commission of sin, and the former prescribing an unavailing repentance.

From the preceding detail of characters, it is, I presume, obvious, that by whatever motives men may appear to be actuated in their conduct with regard to religion, yet the shame of openly adhering to principles whose truth is not disbelieved, proceeds originally from the same pas-

sion in every mind, operating by different means, in proportion to the diversity of taste, sentiment, and disposition. Let us just observe, before we proceed any further, that of the three distinct species of irreligion we have mentioned, the lowest step in the scale naturally and necessarily leads us to ascend to the highest. Thus a man may at first set out in the world with just ideas of the truth and importance of Christianity, and, as a proof of his faith, may endeavour to conform his conversation and his practice to the model of the Gospel: but by giving way to the suggestions of vanity, by subscribing too easily to the opinion of others, and by falling into the company of persons who consider religion as bigotry and priestcraft; by any, or by all of these methods, he will at first perhaps be led to balance a little betwixt the opposite sides, and will be wholly irresolute on which he shall determine. When matters are carried thus far, he will naturally proceed a step further, and will discontinue the open practice of those duties which are enjoined by that religion about whose truth he is uncertain. The practice of Christianity once overthrown, there remain only a few speculative principles, which in this last stage may be easily subverted; and thus the man who entered the world in the service of truth, inlists among the followers of infidelity and falsehood.

Reason, however, as I have had occasion to observe in a preceding part of this discourse, is always rendered subservient to the purposes of passion in matters of this kind; and men are never at a loss to support by plausible, if not by solid, arguments those tenets, which, from interested inducements, they are led to embrace. To examine and refute the arguments by which men impose upon themselves in the present case, was the last thing we proposed as the object of research, and as necessary to compleat our enquiry into the cause and consequences of prejudices against religion.

1. It will perhaps appear upon examination, that men to whom the character of being ashamed of religion is properly appropriated, are misled in their practice by one or other of the following considerations: Either they fall into their conduct from a foolish desire of singularity, and regard a chimerical superiority to vulgar opinions as the mark of an enlarged understanding; or, influenced wholly by the dictates of passion, they never separate the arguments from the character of that person whom they have proposed as the model of imitation; or, lastly, those men who have persisted inflexibly in this practice for a considerable time, satisfy their own minds with this pretence, that, after having weighed, with impartiality, both sides of the question, they cannot find that their own practice is condemned by reason; and in

any case they are exempted from censure, because they are not intentionally, but ignorantly, wrong.

I shall throw together a few reflections on each of these arguments, considered separately.

1. As to the first, we may observe, that persons who are ashamed of religion from no other motive than a mean affectation of singularity, are generally convinced themselves that their practice is not agreeable to the dictates of reason; and therefore they endeavour carefully to conceal the real inducement upon which they act from the cognizance of mankind, as being inwardly conscious of its invalidity. To desire these persons to reflect, that neither truth nor falsehood depends upon the fluctuating opinions of individuals or societies; to inform them, that it is therefore as ridiculous to act as if they disbelieved any doctrine of revelation merely because it had obtained universal credit, as it would be to deny that there have been such persons as Alexander and Cæsar, because the fact is not commonly called in question; this method of reasoning would be wholly superfluous, because of this truth they are already ascertained. I would, therefore, only ask such men to advert, whether, by indulging this habit, they are not dashing upon that rock which they most sedulously study to avoid. Let them reflect, whether, while they declaim against passion,

fion, they are not themselves submitting to her government, by proceeding in a course which they pretend not to justify. Let them think, while they brand enthusiasm with ignominious epithets, whether they themselves are not the grossest enthusiasts, if that title may be appropriated to persons who are actuated by an impulse which they know to be wrong, but do not endeavour to resist. If they would hear with indignation the name of furious Zealot applied to their own characters, let them consider what designation can be more justly appropriated to persons who have enlisted in the service of Passion, and are every moment sacrificing conviction to caprice. We need only to change a few circumstances, and all the epithets of reproach which the Freethinker liberally bestows on the Religionist, may with equal reason be retorted on himself. The only difference betwixt the extreme on either side is, that the latter suffers himself to be led too far by adhering to maxims which are originally founded on reason, while the former inflexibly pursues a course of which he is sensible, in many cases, that reason disapproves. The man of principle, therefore, even supposing his conduct to be in some measure culpable, is as much preferable, upon the whole, to him who is ashamed of religion from the affectation of singularity, as a man who errs with a good intention is to him who commits the same fault in defiance of conviction.

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2. The second plea by which men attempt to vindicate their being ashamed of religion, will be found, upon examination, as unequal as the first. It proceeds, as I already observed, from considering the *character* of the person whom they propose to imitate, and being kept by this circumstance from weighing *his arguments*. This plea is exhibited with a good deal of ostentation by some advocates of infidelity, who seem to exult in the number of *great names* which can be produced on their side of the question. The defenders of Christianity generally reply by making out a list of the opposite party, and the impartial are left to decide on either part, as they are differently prompted by taste and disposition. Without repeating what hath been advanced on either side, I shall only enquire at present, how far the Freethinker, simply considered as such in any sense of the word, may be said to discover an enlarged understanding.

That persons of unquestioned penetration and discernment have, on some occasions, maintained loose and dangerous opinions in the matters of religion, is a truth which experience will not permit us to question. But let it be remembered, that the point in dispute is not, whether a man of understanding ever was an infidel, but how far it is consistent with this character to propagate doctrines which are prejudicial to society? I say, Christians, prejudicial to society; because the man who is ashamed of Christ,

Christ, and who endeavours to infuse his sentiments into others, acts such a part as is unworthy any member of that body, which is in a great measure supported by the positive institutions of Christianity.

Setting aside every other benefit, is not the appointment of one day in seven an excellent mean to preserve a proper union, and free circulation of sentiments, among the different members of any one community? and are not the persons who at this time dispense the ordinances of religion, to be regarded, if not as the servants of God, yet at least as necessary friends to the interests of society? Considered, therefore, merely in a political light, is not every attempt to subvert this institution, or to turn the dispensers of these ordinances into ridicule, is it not, in fact, a blow levelled at the foundation of government? and is it not ultimately subversive of one rule by which society is cemented?---Is it then the work of reason, or shall we regard it as the mark of superior understanding, to propose the means of effectuating such an end? At this rate, reason would be to every man the greatest possible disadvantage, as an high degree of it would only qualify him to become universally pernicious to mankind.

Whether, therefore, the persons who are ashamed of religion are or are not possessed of intellectual qualifications in other respects, yet
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we may safely conclude, that, in this particular instance, they exhibit no proof of them. At the same time that we admire the subtlety and acuteness of their arguments, we question their integrity, and impeach their prudence. Considering Christianity, therefore, merely as an human institution, we can regard an infidel of any denomination in no other light than as the marksman who whets his arrows with skill, but dips them in poison. Upon the whole, the man who considers his being ashamed of religion as the mark of an enlarged understanding, merely because it is an imitation of that person whom he regards as a model, ought, for the same reason, if he admires the *Iliad* or *Cyropædia*, to be an heathen, because this was the religion of Homer and Xenophon.

3. The last, and indeed the only specious plea to which men who want to support themselves in this practice have recourse, is the pretended innocence of their intention. After having impartially considered the arguments in favour of an open adherence to certain principles, and having examined the inducements by which they are led to act as if they disbelieved them, they cannot find that their practice is unsupported by argument; and therefore their error, if they have been misled, is owing to ignorance, and not to intention.

The fallacy of this plea lies in the ambiguous meaning which is assigned to the word *impartial*.

partial. It was observed, in the beginning of this discourse, that we can never expect to obtain perfect impartiality in the course of any enquiry which relates to happiness. In fact, it is obvious, that we must, in every process of this nature, be interested either in favour of one party or another. We cannot read a detail of historical transactions without being prepossessed in favour of some particular character, though our reason may inform us, at the same time, that it is far from being intrinsically valuable. In perusing, for instance, the history of those revolutions by which the Roman republic was overturned, is not the man who is captivated with the shining qualities of Cæsar, and who becomes interested on his side, convinced that he was at the bottom a murderer and a tyrant, who meant to sacrifice the liberty of his country to the purposes of ambition? Yet the specious mantle of moderation and humanity, which is thrown over these bad qualities, renders him the involuntary object of admiration and esteem. If prepossessions of this nature are established in the mind contrary to the dictates of reason, and in matters which do not relate to the happiness of any individual, with much greater reason may we suppose, that in things which immediately relate to the attainment of felicity, or which are ultimately connected with it, prejudices of the strongest kind must concur to ob-

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fruct that impartiality with which questions of importance ought to be examined.

In whatever light, therefore, the pretence of vindicating error by the plea of impartiality presents itself to the mind, we shall find it utterly inadequate to the accomplishment of its end. Both the virtuous and vicious part of mankind are alike actuated by prepossession with regard to their religious principles, because both the virtuous and vicious are led to adopt that system of opinions to which their practice may be reconciled with the greatest facility. In the present case, however, it ought to be remembered, that when the influence of a predominant passion is obviously exerted to counteract the decisions of the understanding, as it must be when a man is ashamed of adhering to his principles, he ought to proceed with the utmost circumspection, because he is in imminent hazard of taking a wrong course. We may observe likewise in general, that as propensities to evil adhere so closely to every mind as to be in some measure characteristic of human nature; the man who embraces a system of religion, by which every propensity of this nature is discountenanced, may be presumed to have made a more impartial research than that person who makes a very defective practice the standard of principle.

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Upon the whole, it is evident, that as the plea of impartiality cannot be admitted, unless it is previously supposed that the mind is divested wholly of prepossession ; and as we have already shown, that this can scarce ever be the case in any enquiry whatever ; it obviously follows, that intention cannot atone for an obstinate perseverance in the belief of error, or in the practice of vice.

Thus, my reverend fathers and brethren, I have endeavoured to throw together a few observations on a subject whose importance and utility merited a more ample discussion, and a more experienced enquirer. Permit me, however, just to remark, that if the bounds prescribed to a discourse of this nature should, in some measure, apologize for the former, I shall presume that the indulgence of my reverend audience will make some little allowance for the latter. In a dependance upon this indulgence, let me observe further, that I have purposely crowded the sentiments together as closely as possible, particularly in the argumentative part of this enquiry, that, if I could not suggest any new train of reflection to the minds of my hearers, I might at least avoid the censure of fatiguing their attention. As there can be no use for a particular application of this discourse to the persons to whom it has been more immediately addressed, I shall take the liberty to ap-
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ply the few remaining considerations to the other class of my hearers.

From what hath been advanced on the present subject, you cannot, Christians, receive a more apposite and important admonition than that of the apostle, that if you would keep the middle course in the labyrinth of opinion, and avoid, on every occasion, running to an extreme on either side ; if you would escape being entangled in the mazes of error, and bewildering your feet in intricate paths, when the road before you is open and accessible ;---you ought then, by every possible expedient, *to resist the first beginnings of evil.* Wide as the difference is betwixt good and bad, the boundary by which these are separated terminates in so small a point, that we are often in hazard by carrying the former, as we imagine, to the utmost length, to encroach upon the precincts of the latter. As few men are so wicked as deliberately to propose, at their first setting out in the practice of vice, giving an unlimited indulgence to appetite, so few men are so inconsiderate as to survey the fluctuating objects of opinion, without being at first startled at the two extremes of absolute rejection and superstitious attachment. The young debauchee, like the young traveller, sets out on his journey with diffidence and modesty. He is timid and irresolute : he is alarmed by every changing prospect : he is afraid of the
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unequal road, and he starts back with horror from the mountain and the precipice: but when he hath advanced to a considerable space; when he hath become familiar with the changes on the way; when he hath wandered far from his home, and hath neither power nor inclination to think of returning; he then proceeds with more firmness and fortitude: he is no longer alarmed by the impending precipice: he rusheth on headlong with fatal resolution, till at last he stumbles, and drops into the grave. Such, Christians, is the fate of many a person, who, upon his first deviation from the paths of duty, would be struck with horror at the most distant insinuation of being led to that pitch of extravagance at which he arrives by imperceptible approaches.---The beginnings of evil, therefore, ought steddily to be resisted. Would you know by what method this end may be effectuated?---I answer, by attending to the voice of conscience, which will not fail to check you, when you are taking a wrong course; by suspecting yourself of falling into error on every occasion in which you are prompted to adopt any opinion, or to perform any action by the impulse of a predominant passion; by accustoming your minds to self-examination in every material step of your conduct; and as this temper is not the native growth of the mind, corrupted and vitiated as it is by inherent propensity, by imploring

implored the influence of the spirit of God to infuse these dispositions into the heart, to repress the efforts of seducing temptation, and to render your characters conformable, in some measure, to the standard of the gospel. *Amen*

THE END